

Tale of Two Envelopes

The manila envelope was addressed to Konstantin in Gran Elka's elegant handwriting. Inside there were three sheets, by some reason handwritten although he knew Gran had a decent printer, and a receipt of some kind. The first sheet was a short letter.

"Dear Kosta,

Your grandpa and I have been blessed with a long happy life and we would like to be remembered for how we have lived. We would not like somber faces, not viewing, simplest coffins, the graves are arranged and paid for eternity (receipt is enclosed), just a little service by Father Ivan before we are buried in Brashlyan, and he will guide you what needs to be done.

However I know that many people will come to say goodbye. We would like you to arrange a dinner for them all, if the weather permits - in a nice garden restaurant, and you will be able to sit under open skies, to talk and reminiscent about us over a glass of wine and some fine food that will leave a better taste of the day. We believe they will all understand. We trust you will do the same for the villagers of Brashlyan after the burial.

You will find also enclosed Konstantin's and my wills. They have been discussed with your parents and Georgi and they agreed that it will be easier if you inherit everything to simplify the process, with the understanding that they will be able to ask for help if needed. We have no doubts in you and neither have they. Mr. Peter Petrov, our notary in Bourgas, is entrusted with the details and the documents. He might be able to attend the funeral in Brashlyan if he so wishes.

We know that it is a lot that we ask for, but our most earnest wish is that you spend the first forty days after the funeral in Brashlyan. There are funds for that left with Mr. Petrov and he has instructions to handle them to you upon the news of our demise. We trust you that you will understand our motives for this wish once these forty days are finished and then you will make a decision that will change the fate of many. We love you and in our heart of hearts are sure that it will be a right decision.

With all our love”

The letter was signed by both Grandma Elka and Grandpa Konstantin, his hand a little trembling, like on the one-page will that he had written himself. The other will was identical except for the name of the testator. As the letter said, they both willed everything they owned to Konstantin outright and he was the only executor. The wills were dated nine months ago, shortly upon his return from France. The young man sighed and handed the sheets to Rada. She read them fast and shook her head.

‘Don’t you find it strange that they never doubted they will die together? What if only one of them had died?’

‘May be then Mitzi would not have given me the letter. Whoever survived would have written a new one, I presume.’

‘But the wills, they will you everything, not to each other.’

‘I know, but may be they thought that it will be easier and you know, soon enough, anyway. Rada, they were in their mid-nineties, how many people around live that much and with clear heads? Will you come to visit me?’

‘Where shall I visit you?’

‘In Brashlyan. You see, I need to be there for forty days starting from the day of the funeral.’

‘But the letter says they wish you to go, it is not obligatory. I am sorry, I said that before I thought, of course you should go. Yes, I will try to take few days and come, may be even bring Mitzi with me if you don’t mind.’

‘I don’t. How about we go and tell her that and then go to bed. I will spend the day in the airport tomorrow.’

No surprise registered with Mitzi about the wills of the elder Kaloyanovs which confirmed Konstantin's suspicion that he was probably the last to know about their plans and to some extent he felt grateful. His grandparents had given him some time, free of obligations and thought of if's and maybe's, time to get the taste of city life, have fun, pursue a career. Now it was time to pay back a fraction of the lavish amount of love and respect he had received from them. Forty days were nothing compared to the feeling that no matter what, he had his safe place in a secret village where the high doors of a big house were always open for him, where he could pour all his childhood grieves although so remotely foreign to people who lived there; where he was free to dream or read or swim or pick up cucumbers at the garden under the watchful care of the entire population, where he could imagine strange things and listen to old women's tales about strange creatures which for sure lived under the church stairs or came to dance at the meadows. Brashlyan was a mythical place where his Gran and Gramps would live as long as he and Georgi were around, he thought and a stone lifted from his heart and shattered.

'I should tell that to Dimitar!' he did not realize that he had spoken aloud.

'What shall you tell him?' asked Mitzi puzzled.

'I am sorry, I forgot to tell you. Mitzi, his grandfather died today shortly before five. I don't know if you knew him personally, but I should have told our sculptor that our grandparents will live as long as we are around, as long as we remember them.'

'I knew Tanas Tanassov, I did,' Mitzi said, looking somewhere beyond his shoulder. She was strangely pale, Konstantin noticed. The day had been awful for her as well and she had done her best to console him and Rada, he felt guilty. May be he could have spared the news, he had no idea whether they had been close once upon a time, they were the same generation. He wished he had bitten his tongue.

'Do you know when the funeral is going to be?'

'I will wait for Mom and Dad to come and then we will discuss it.'

'No, not for Elka and Konstantin, for Tanas.'

'I think Dimitar said Saturday and in Varna. Would you plan to attend, I will call him and ask for the arrangements.'

'No, Kosta, I just asked. I will call him myself tomorrow, it is all right.' She shook her head. 'How about some food? Go to the kitchen you both, I need to make a call and will join you.'

Vesselin picked up the receiver on the second ring.

'You thought that there will be three people to die today, right?'

'Mitzi, what happened?'

'Tanassov had died today shortly before five.'

'How do you know?'

'Dimitar, his grandson, called Konstantin to postpone their meeting for tomorrow.'

There was a pause. Vesselin sighed.

'Do you really think that Todor came for him?'

'I do. You remember what Poshtov told Boris about that night, that Tanas tried to revive him. It is only logical. And it also means...'

'That he is forgiven. I know yet it is hard to believe that it is all over.'

'I doubt it is, Vesselin, I doubt it will ever be. It is just another link in the chain. I will need to talk to you and Milena tomorrow, it is not urgent, but Elka told me something when they came and I want to discuss it with you.'

'Come anytime. Good night, Mitzi.'

One more of the generation who was torn between the millstones of the history had gone, thought Mitzi. She was not exactly sad for Tanas, he had had more chances in life than many, including most of his victims and his accomplices, and he had used those chances well. But he was taking to the grave the real story and was living a void to be filled with fabrications, now that the fear was going to be forgotten. Yet Mitzi has seen enough to suspect him that even from the grave he would wave a finger at some and make the life of many uneasy to say the least. She had not forgotten his complete oblivion to the suffering of the others who had the misfortune to be on his way, the focus on the goal without looking what he was crushing on the way to it, the ruined families and lives along his pursuit of ultimate power. She had neither forgotten not pardoned the

hounds he unleashed, who were much worse than he had ever been because he was one of the very few who were not blinded by the blood they spilled, did not thrive on the agony of his prey and did not lose his cool head. That had saved several people who Mitzi held dear. She was a wise woman and understood that he was a product of the system as much as its creator. Several years before she had seen something else - the complete devastation of that man, his understanding that his life pursuit had been in vain, that he had reached the top only to find that it was not different from the bottom in the only aspect that interested him. Tanas had been a deeply unhappy man despite the wealth, despite the illusion of power. Neither the former nor the latter were able to bring him what he craved most without understanding it - the genuine love and admiration of the people who he cherished. He had been a loner and even in his charity he had remained such. Dimitar had told her that in the recent years his grandfather had changed a lot and she did not doubt his observation. Poor guy, he had no idea what long and winding road Tanas had travelled! He had sent her once upon a time chrysanthemums showing a long memory. She would return the gesture. In the morning she should arrange for a basket to be sent.

There was more a feeling rather than vision that registered it first - a man in black that was standing at the door of the study leading to the garden. Mitzi's hand went in the drawer where she kept her weapon ready, but the tap on the glass made her relax the grip immediately. She stood and opened the door to her unexpected guest.

'Good evening!' he greeted her politely.

'Good to you too. It must be important to come so late.'

'Yes, I thought you should know. Tanas Tanassov died today.'

'Shortly before five.'

An admiration rearranged the stranger's features. Mitzi smiled. 'A mere coincidence, I am afraid. His grandson called my tenant and he told me. I appreciate your visit anyway.'

'It is impressive never the less. I am sorry for your friends, the old couple.'

'I see news travel fast these days. Yes, they were very good friends of mine and I will miss them terribly.'

'I better go. These neighbors of yours could have put some order in their junk yard; it was really hard to pass... If you need me, you know the place. Good night!'

'You need to know something. I am not going to be in Sofia during most of the summer, but if you need me, please do call. Good night!'

Valkuda had finished an exhaustive monologue depicting a particularly good revenue generating plant that supplied half the gourmet restaurants in Varna with several types of fresh mushrooms year round. She took a sip of water and returned her glass to the small table at the corner of Tanas' study. They have been sitting there for almost two hours, Dimitar mutinously thought, it was time to stretch at least. But the pile of files on the third armchair was alarmingly big and he decided to act. 'How about a break?'

'You had three bathroom breaks for the last hour and a half!'

'You know, I have some blood that needs moving. I usually don't spend that much time sitting in the same position, even if I paint. As you promptly noticed, I have been trying to run away.'

'I doubt you have lots of chances to do that from now on.'

'Listen, I already got the idea - Grandpa left me a fortune about which I have no clue and left you to manage it. I promise I will not interfere and let you do exactly that. Now can we stop it, please?'

'Do you have any idea how many people hang on that fortune?'

'If I got correctly - half the town and their brothers.'

'I am not joking. You cannot waltz out of it so easily.'

'Valkuda, I am not waltzing out, I want a break and I really think that I have had enough for today!'

Valkuda looked at her wristwatch and sighed. It was already past ten and the morning would come soon enough. She started picking up the files.

'Please don't forget to set the alarm of the second floor before you go to bed.'

'There is a security at the door, why do I need an alarm?'

'The security is at the doors, but the second floor has windows also. We have already talked about it.'

'Are you sure that is not paranoid? Who in his right mind will attack me of all people?'

'Dimitar, we may talk about it until I am blue in the face and you want to go to bed. Please, do it for today, trust me.'

'All right, all right, I will. By the way, if it is so dangerous for me, it should be so dangerous for you also, as you are the next heir presumptive.'

'There are very few people who know about the conditions of the will. I doubt they will be after my throat so fast.'

'No, that is not fair. They will be after me, but not after you - that does not make sense even to my artistic illogical nature. How about you set the alarm and stay here, there are plenty of rooms as far as I know; the entire third floor is a guest room!'

There was a hesitation written all over her. Dimitar pushed his luck. 'If you stay, I will toss another half an hour of listening! It would not be wise to go home alone at that time, you told me so!'

The young woman thought that her own words had backfired. Another half an hour would be good. Maybe they could even stray a little from the listing of properties and have a night cup.

'Well, I will stay, but we are not talking business, we can have tea and some cake, we still have plenty.'